

EPA proposes easing reporting requirements on toxic pollution

By JOHN HEILPRIN Associated Press Writer

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The government wants to quit forcing companies to report small releases of toxic pollutants and allow them to submit reports on their pollution less frequently.

Saying it wants to ease its regulatory burden on companies, the Environmental Protection Agency on Wednesday proposed adopting a "short form" that would excuse companies from disclosing spills and other releases of toxic substances if:

_They claim to release fewer than 5,000 pounds of a specific chemical. The current limit is 500 pounds.

_They store onsite but claim to release "zero" amounts of the worst pollutants, such as mercury, DDT and PCBs, that persist in the environment and work up the food chain. However, they must report if they have stored dioxin or dioxin-like compounds, even if none is released.

EPA said it also plans to ask Congress for permission to require the accounting every other year instead of annually. The EPA's annual Toxics Release Inventory began under a 1986 community right-to-know law. The first year the change could be possible, if Congress agreed, would be 2008.

"We certainly recognize there will be concerns moving to every other year," said Kimberly Nelson, EPA's assistant administrator for environmental information. "Every community will still have the same information about the types of toxic releases. They just won't have some of the details in terms of how that particular substance was managed or released."

Independent Sen. James Jeffords of Vermont called the proposal "a frontal assault" on one of the nation's most successful environmental laws.

"The community right to know act will become the community right to know every other year act," said Jeffords, a former chairman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. "This proposal would deny communities up-to-date information about local toxic releases, reduce incentives to minimize the generation of toxic waste and undermine the ability of public health agencies and researchers to identify important trends."

Reducing information on more than 600 chemicals put in the air, water and land will make it harder for officials, communities and interest groups to help protect public health, said Meghan Purvis, an environmental health advocate for the U.S. Public Interest Research Group.

Some big chemical companies said complying with the annual toxic inventory is not a problem for them.

"We are so in compliance it's not funny," Andrew Liveris, president of The Dow Chemical Company, told the AP. "We've adjusted to it many years ago."

The looser reporting requirements are intended to let off the hook as many as a third of the 23,000 companies that now report their pollution to the government, according to the EPA.

Nelson estimated the shorter forms would save businesses about 165,000 hours a year in paperwork. If Congress agrees to require the reports every two years instead of annually, that would save another 2 million hours, she said.

"With 20 years of experience under our belt, we recognize that we can reduce the burden without losing much of the data we now receive," Nelson said in an interview. "These are very small facilities that account for a very small percentage of the releases."

In the latest inventory EPA released in May, overall chemical pollution fell more than 6 percent from 2002 to 2003, the latest year for which total figures are available, though there were increases in levels of mercury, PCBs and dioxin. Some 4.44 billion pounds of toxic chemicals were released in 2003, compared with 4.74 billion pounds in 2002.